

Thank you Chairs McCrory and Sanchez and to the rest of the Connecticut Education Committee for having this hearing, and I want to remark it truly is wonderful to see some familiar faces. For those of you who may not know me, my name is Camilo Lemos, and I am the Community Engagement Manager for Excellence Community Schools in Connecticut, most commonly recognized by our flagship CT school, Stamford Excellence, currently a pre-k through grade 7 charter school in Connecticut's very own Stamford. I am here to speak in support of two items on today's agenda, Senate Bill 229: An Act Concerning The Charter School Approval Process, and House Bill 5283: An Act Concerning The Education Cost Sharing Grant Formula And The Funding Of Other Education Programs.

Senate Bill 229 seeks to change the process for approving a state charter school, which currently is a drawn out process that involves 3 separate entities and multiple steps in getting a charter approved and funded. In broad terms, a charter application is defined by the operator filing an application with the State Board of Ed, which then gets reviewed, and a public hearing is held with local and regional boards of education making comments, with a vote on granting an initial certificate of approval for the charter occurring after by the State Board of Ed. The SBE submits a copy of the initial certificate of approval and a summary of the comments made at the public hearing to the legislature's Education and Appropriations Committees, which can choose to appropriate funds to the State Department of Education. It's only at the junction of funds being appropriated upon which the charter's certificate of approval becomes effective. This means that for the duration of the time from the charters initial certificate of approval to the appropriation of funding from the Education and Appropriations Committees, some schools are receiving a 0 cash flow from the state, and could become financially strained in their first year of operations due to unforeseen issues like heating problems or leaky pipes, all while waiting for the end of session to receive funding from the General Assembly.

Senate Bill 229 seeks to empower the State Board of Education to directly approve charter schools, and have the State Department of Education request from the governor an approval of funding for charter schools in his/her annual budget, as well as creating a non-lapsing fund set aside for state and local charters. This account would eliminate the issue of first year funding, as money in that fund would "be expended by the Commissioner of Education for the purpose of providing grants to a local or state charter school that has been granted an initial certificate for approval for a charter in the fiscal year immediately following the fiscal year in which such initial certificate for approval for a charter was granted".

House Bill 5283 is a wide encompassing bill that has several components that I am not attempting to diminish by shortening down to several sentences, but I feel obligated to speak on the sections in the short time I have left and to note that the basis of HB 5283 is implementing a student centered funding model. Currently, there is a \$725 million funding gap between higher-need districts (which are defined by having 25% or more of the scholars in that district receiving free or reduced lunch) and all other districts. Section 1 of HB 5283 would "Provide full funding of the ECS formula for underfunded districts receiving an increase in Fiscal Year 2025, rather than in FY 2028, while maintaining the ECS phase-out schedule for overfunded districts receiving a decrease in funds is maintained through FY 2030." While student-centered funding alone will not bridge that gap, it will reduce the inequities in funding for Connecticut scholars.

Section 2 "creates a choice program grant for students attending Open Choice, interdistrict magnet schools, and vocational agriculture programs starting in FY 2025, with the grant calculated using

the ECS foundation of \$11,525 multiplied by the Total Need Student count based on the prior year enrollment.” This is critical for the funding of open choice schools, as it would lead to a more uniform and fair funding by fully funding schools based on student needs.

Sect 3 would requires the State Department of Education to calculate estimated choice program grants for FY 2025 for local public school districts, the Open Choice program, interdistrict magnet schools, vocational agricultural programs, and charter schools, and provide estimated grants to each district or choice program operator by January 1, 2024.

Section 4 Clarifies current practice that students enrolled in interdistrict magnet schools are counted in the ECS Resident Student Count of the district in which the student resides, starting in FY 2025 and eliminates the requirement that sending towns must support the education of interdistrict magnet school students by paying regular education K-12 tuition, starting in FY 202, which is a more fair model of contribution because a sending district isn’t necessarily reducing expenditures when a student attends a choice program school.

I would be more than glad to take any questions and answer them to the best of my ability.